

November 5th 2020

I'd like to start with a true story I was part of at a church where I served on the Cowley Road in Oxford. Chris, our Vicar was leading an evening celebration on Advent Sunday We were to start in the side chapel and progress round the church, stopping at different points to sing Advent hymns and listen to readings and poems. We carried candles, most of the lights were low, and our little service would culminate at the high altar.

We had just reached the font when the door was flung open and a very tall and imposing man swept in. He wore the green, red and yellow striped woollen hat of Rastafarians and was clearly either very ill or high on drugs – I soon came to believe the former. He moved to the middle of the neat circle we had made around the font and took off his hat and held it out expectantly. Chris, who had a gift for defusing potentially threatening situations, hitched up his robes to find loose change which he placed in the man's hat. Following his

example those who had loose change did the same. We then resumed our service continuing with our hymns and readings and prayers and our progress around the darkened church.

The man didn't leave but joined us still clearly unwell and still clutching his hat. As a small congregation we somehow managed to contain his somewhat scary presence until we all headed for the final part of our Advent celebration at the high altar. As we were gathering the man in the woollen hat broke ranks, strode up to the altar, raised his eyes to heaven and said, "Sorry it's not more" whilst tipping the money in his hat out onto the altar. None of us expected that! ---- He was one of Jesus' lost ones who showed us that we ourselves were also lost!

It's so very easy to make judgements; we all certainly had that night and the Pharisees were making judgements about the company that Jesus kept. "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." I read this week that there must have been a *riotous atmosphere at Jesus'*

dinner parties! He never obeyed the rules and he's about to make matters even worse. The stories we have read are about a shepherd and a woman who both lost things and they are spoken of as examples to us. This wouldn't have suited many pious Jews: shepherds were regarded as lowest of the low and women were not far behind. The shepherd found his sheep, the woman her coin; they both gather friends for parties – probably come-as-you-are and riotous parties ---- and Jesus says it should remind us of the angels singing in heaven! For those who dislike the company he keeps it's not going to help his reputation!

The angels are rejoicing “over one sinner who repents” and what we have read takes us into thinking about this beautiful word repentance, metanoia. I love the definition given by the biblical scholar Marcus Borg when he explains that this word repentance means “to go beyond the mind that you have”. As Jesus tells these 2 stories I believe he is urging his hearers, which of course includes us, to open our eyes to a new way of looking ---- in the same way that we

learned to look with new eyes at the man with the stripey hat. We are being challenged to learn to look differently, to make different judgements.

On a freezing cold day some years ago I went with Duncan to a march in London to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the end of the transatlantic slave trade. At the end of the march we gathered on a sport's ground and, as we began to lose all feeling in our toes, we had a series of talks, one by Rowan Williams. He reminded us that good Christian people had been implicated in this terrible human trade, had not questioned it, were comfortable with it. He left us with the question what are we being blind to today, what is hidden from *us*. It's the question of these parables urging us to be ready again and again to go beyond the mind that we have.

This is not a one off event but a challenge that is with us for the rest of our lives. It is as we slowly allow our minds to be changed, turning round times without number that we begin to also

understand the word sin, so unpopular today. It seems like a word that needs to be rehabilitated. Week by week when we say “Lord have mercy” we are making confession for sin. There was a time when I used to worry terribly that I hadn’t remembered all my sins so that I never really felt forgiven. That changed when I read a book about the communion service and what we are doing in each part of it. The writer showed so very clearly that we never get to the moment when we are totally free from sin and that it is important to remember that we come to church as part of a sinful society for which it is our duty to pray.

This is not to deny that individual self-awareness of our inner conflicts is important. Individual and corporate awareness of sin belong together, one informing the other. To separate one from another is to move in directions that are ultimately unhealthy. To concentrate on my individual sin alone is to lead to unhealthy guilt or pride: to concentrate purely on the sinful society I am part of is to let myself off the hook,

think it's someone else's fault. Both belong together.

The book I read, now sadly out of print, remarks that *"Once our confession of sin becomes an identification with the sin of the world, we shall find ourselves impossibly grimy"* (John Hadley, *Bread of the World* p23). This can perhaps be a depressing thought until we remember the riotous supper parties Jesus was part of and that he was criticised for being a drunkard and a glutton. In everything he did he was identifying with us, allowing our grimy-ness to be his, our dust to get up his nose; he ultimately took it to the cross.

What we have read today gives us a wonderful picture of how repentance and forgiveness work together in of kind of dance in which we are partnered by God. It is as we respond, listening, looking within, being real about who we've hurt or what we've said that we can turn around, move beyond, receive the forgiveness that always flows freely towards us. There is a wonderful poem by the American poet Molly

Peacocke called Forgiveness and I'd like to read part of it now

Forgiveness is not an abstraction/ for it needs a body to feel its relief. Knees, shoulders, spine are required to adore/ the lightness of a burden removed. ----- Now the shortfall/ that crippled your posture finds sudden peace/ in the muscular, physical brightness/ of a day alive.

This echoes the angels dance in heaven as they rejoice over each and every time we turn around and step back towards our God. The angels know full well that many more turns will be necessary in the dance of forgiveness. However they hope that we will get stuck right back into the messiness of the world so that we can pray and work for its turning. Then we can include our broken world day by day, week by week, in our prayers of penitence knowing that we walk beside our creator who every minute of every day welcomes us into the dance of the angels. Amen.

Jesus our exalted Lord has been given all authority. Let us seek his intercession, that our prayers may be perfected by his prayer

We use a prayer from South Africa to ask that within ourselves, within our communities and within our world we might be granted the grace to turn around, to repent

Creator God,

Give us a heart for simple things;

love and laughter,

bread and wine,

tales and dreams.

Fill our lives with green and growing hope.

Make us a people of justice,

Whose song is alleluia

And whose name breathes love.

Turn us O God and we shall be turned,

Lord in your mercy

Grant your deep peace both to those who find it hard to feel forgiven and to those who find it

hard to forgive particularly all who have been harmed by the violence of others. May your church be a reconciling presence wherever Christians meet together in your name. Lead us continually into the joy of repentance.

Lord in your mercy

As we await the final results of the American election we pray for the next president of the United States, that you will grant him the grace of the authority bestowed upon him and that he will lead that great nation in your ways of wisdom, justice and righteousness. Fill those disappointed with the outcome with restraint and with the need for compromise. From within the divisions of our world and our own country we pray for healing and for unity.

Lord in your mercy

In the face of another lockdown we pray for politicians who have the task of making big decisions, for those who advise them and for the opposition parties as they hold those decisions to account. We hold in your keeping

all who are worried about their businesses and livelihoods, families finding it hard to make ends meet and all people who are struggling with mental anguish at this time. Be beside all NHS staff and all who are in hospital.

Lord in your mercy

As America withdraws from the Paris climate agreement we pray for all who are in any way working for the protection and health of our fragile planet. We remember especially the indigenous peoples of the world and their work to protect our rain forests. Give a safe place to live for all refugees fleeing drought and flood.

Lord in your mercy

From within our own communities and families we pray in a moment of quiet for any we know to be in need of our prayers at this time.

Lord in your mercy

At this time of remembering we give thanks for the saints who surround us and for those who have been part of our lives and our stories.

Merciful Father -----